

Resort development and the issue of tenures for commercial use of the backcountry

During the December 15, 2004 board meeting, Ken Holmes stressed the importance of each member writing to our MLA and Minister of State Resort Development Sandy Santori regarding your opinion about the development of easily accessible backcountry areas, resort development and tenures for commercial use of the backcountry.

Below is a note from Ken to the membership which includes text from his recent well-written and informative letter to Minister Santori.

(Minister Santori can be contacted by email or mail. [Here](#) is a downloadable copy of the Final Resort Strategy and Action Plan for BC and other news of the Resort Task Force.)

B.C.resort strategy and action plan and the issuing of commercial tenures for back country recreation.

The purpose of this note is to urge members to continue to express their opinions to Government about resort development and the issue of commercial tenures for the backcountry of B.C. It contains most of the text of a letter I have recently sent to Sandy Santori suitably modified to address the members of the club or society.

In February of this year, I wrote a letter to Sandy Santori entitled “B.C.Super unnatural”. That letter expressed my concern about over-development and saturation leading to possibly spoiling the ‘Super-natural’ experience many visitors seek when they come to British Columbia . The letter urged the Government to take some responsibility for planning how many operations a region can sustain. It included copies of articles from two U.S magazines expressing similar concerns. However, that letter did not elicit a response.

Similar sentiments and concerns are expressed in a full-page article in The Globe and Mail, Saturday December 18th 2004 . The article expresses the concerns of many in the tourism industry about over development, going too fast, overlapping tenures and conflict, development undermining existing back country operations and destroying one of B.C.’s greatest assets.... its’ solitude, i.e. “B.C. Supernatural”. It is noticeable that this slogan appears to be no longer used by the Government.

The Globe and Mail article, for example, describes the concerns of the proprietor of Purcell Lodge about the noise from helicopters spoiling the experience of his guests if a heli-ski license is granted adjacent to his tenure. This is a very real problem which I have personally experienced whilst back country skiing from lodges and backcountry huts in other areas such as Durrand Glacier, Fairy Meadows in the Adamants, Sorcerer Hut, Olive Hut and the Bonnington Range near Nelson to name a few. Whilst on a KMC mountaineering trip in the Premier Range west of Blue River , I had similar experiences due to commercial heli-hiking operations in the area. The helicopter even landed a group of heli-hikers a hundred meters from our camp so that they could wander around the

small lake where we were camped. These are real problems which already exist and will get worse in the future unless the Government takes active measures to manage tenures and fully assess their impact. The article quite correctly in my opinion says that the Government is not doing this in its rush to approve tenures.

We have a classic example of Government mismanagement and conflict in our own backyard, i.e. the Bonnington Range near Nelson. In the late 1980's, some members of the Kootenay Mountaineering Club had a vision of huts in the Bonnington Range to facilitate a ski traverse of the area. In cooperation with the Ministry of Forests it built the Grassy Hut, the Steed Hut and the Copper Mountain Hut in addition to the already existing Huckleberry hut. The traverse was an attractive backcountry adventure where one could experience solitude and BC backcountry close to urban centres such as Trail and Nelson. The Government later granted a tenure to a commercial operator to build Snowwater Lodge with approval to do commercial snowcat skiing, snowmobiling, heli-skiing or ski touring. In addition, a cabin was built by the Nelson and Slocan snowmobile clubs a short distance from the Snowwater Lodge. The wilderness experience is now totally different to when the KMC first built its huts. Then, one could experience the peace and solitude of the mountains. Last March when a group of us did the traverse, there was a helicopter dropping off heliskiers each day of our trip, there were snowmobilers accessing the area from the Nelson side and the Salmo side and they were high pointing all slopes. One day we saw heli ski and snowmobilers in the same vicinity as each other. All slopes were fully tracked out. The advice I would give now to anyone contemplating a trip in the area isdon't go.... find somewhere else. The area is ruined by for all because of Government mismanagement and failure to assess the impact of all these activities. That being said, it is not all the fault of the current Government. Many of the existing commercial tenures were issued under the previous NDP Government, but have continued "in spades" under the aggressive development strategy of the Liberal Government.

I have been reading the British Columbia Resort Action and Strategy Plan which is all about growing tourism and actions to double tourism in the next 10 years. I still have concerns about over development and sustainability as expressed in my previous letter to Sandy Santori and I share many of the concerns expressed in the Globe and Mail article.

If you take a map of Southern British Columbia and draw a 125 mile radius around Rossland / Trail, then look at winter recreation opportunities which already exist within that radius, you will find the following: -

- 12 downhill ski areas
- 13 cross country ski clubs
- 10 cat skiing operations
- 9 heli ski operations

- 19 back country ski touring lodges
- 13 snowmobile clubs
- 19 commercial snow-mobile tour operators

There may be more, many of them I knew about, others I came up with after about an hours searching on the Internet. This is already a lot of winter recreation activity and development!

All of these operations and organizations presumably have areas of land where they operate, which is either tenured or unofficially used. One would also assume that these operations have “staked out “ the prime areas.

Many questions arise in my mind: -

- How much more development can this area sustain?
- Has any Government planning been done to determine this or is it leaving it to operators, tenure applicants, the market or LWBC?
- Will the Government take into account the very real problems arising from overlapping or incompatible adjacent tenures and the conflicts which can arise?
- Has the Government done a marketing study to determine present and future demand for these winter tourism activities?
- Will the needs of “non resort users” of British Columbia be considered in the planning process?
- Will some areas be left untouched for other backcountry users?

This latter point is very important. There are many users of B.C.’s back country, both local residents and tourists who do not use resorts or commercial operations but plan, organize and carry out trips into the back country using their own resources. These people spend money buying equipment, staying in hotels and lodges, visit restaurants and spend “tourist” type dollars. It is important to ensure that those who enjoy the backcountry of B.C in winter without the use of commercial resorts have some areas designated for their use. I, like many of you, have previously pointed out to Sandy Santori and LWBC that there are relatively few areas suitable for back country skiing, snowshoeing, etc in the West Kootenays , which are accessible in winter from maintained public highways. Its is important that these areas remain available to the public. At Kootenay Pass for example, on a good day in winter I have seen cars with licence plates from B.C., Idaho , Washington , Quebec and Ontario all in one day. The use of the back country for ski touring, snowshoeing and snowboarding is a growing pastime and yet

people who use the backcountry under their own power are becoming increasingly marginalized. In addition to tourism, the lifestyle attractions of “Supernatural B C” attracts people to live in rural areas of British Columbia bringing jobs with them and to make investments and start businesses. I know that this is what brought me to the Kootenays and many of you similarly.

Giving away more and more Crown land to commercial tenures will discourage this sector of backcountry users and they will go elsewhere. Many people come from Europe to experience B.C. wilderness and solitude, which they can not find in Europe . Having ski toured, hiked and done mountaineering in many areas of Europe before emigrating to Canada I can understand what they are seeking. If they don't find it in British Columbia they will try to find it in Alaska or the Northwest Territories or elsewhere.

Here in the Rossland area, once again we see an application for tenure for commercial cat skiing in the Rossland Range in an area heavily used by the public for backcountry skiing and snowmobiling i.e.Mts. Crowe, Neptune and Mackie. It is important that the Government does a proper assessment of the impact and benefits or losses. It is my opinion that Land and Water B.C should put this tenure application on hold pending the Land Use Recreation Study being planned by the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management. I believe Sandy Santori helped to “broker” this proposed study in the Rossland area. The tenure should not be pushed through the 140-day LWBC process without proper assessment and involvement of local stakeholders. It would create a farce of the proposed study if LWBC pushed through this tenure without waiting for the outcome of the study and would solidify the perception, already held by many, that LWBC is only concerned about commercialization of Crown lands without considering the needs of other users.

In the Rossland area in the past we have seen several tenure applications for commercial mechanized use of areas used by the general public for backcountry recreation. It was only through raising public awareness and putting pressure on tenure holders that we managed to prevent the tenures from advancing. There was certainly little Government consideration of user needs. Here is a situation where the Government could show some leadership to ensure that stakeholders are properly involved, and all aspects of the application considered. We should urge that they do this.

One last comment, it was noticeable to me that the list of external advisory group members named in the B C Resort Strategy and Action Plan issued by the Government only includes people with commercial interest in resort development. This is like having the wolves control the chicken farm!!!! We should suggest that there should be some representation on that advisory board of people who can see both the pros and cons of resort development. There should also be some representation from the non-resort sector of the tourism industry.

Unless we continue to make our representations to Government, we will lose more of the backcountry to commercial interests. Please take the time to send a letter or e-mail expressing your opinions.

Written by Ken Holmes 21st December 2004